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DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, CANADA.

NUMBERED LETTER

TO: THE UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE FOR
EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, OTTAWA, CANADA.

FROM: The Canadian Embassy, HAVANA, Cuba.

Reference: Our letter No. L-317 of April 21, 1961.

Subject: Cuban Conflict - Chronology.

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References

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Our only sources of information concerning the dramatic series of events in Cuba during the last ten days have been the tersely worded official communiques and Government propaganda. All communications were covered; wild rumours and completely contradictory reports gained credence through repetition and circulation. For the record, therefore, the following chronology, seasoned with a few personal experiences that may help to communicate the atmosphere of this unusual situation, may be useful.

April 13 - El Encanto, Cuba's largest department store, burned to the ground. The fire was attributed to arson and the damage was estimated at \$7 million. This was the most blatant act of sabotage in a steadily mounting campaign and it was followed by indignant Government-sponsored demonstrations demanding death for terrorists and saboteurs.

April 15 - At 6:00 a.m., Havana, Santiago de Cuba and San Antonio de los Baños awakened to the sound of exploding bombs, anti-aircraft and machinegun fire which lasted for more than an hour (our telegram No. 128 of April 15). The Government blamed the United States (our telegram No. 129 of April 15), and Prime Minister Castro described the attack as a prelude to invasion. Attached is an eyewitness account of the incident as seen by two Embassy employees.

April 16 - Havana had the jitters. Cuban Air Force fighters patrolled the skies and gunboats criss-crossed the waterfront. Sporadic machinegun fire was heard and trigger-happy troops scattered crowds sunning themselves on the beaches. Attached is a memorandum relating the experience of the First Secretary of the Spanish Embassy, who witnessed an incident when gunners at the military airport opened fire on one of their own planes.

April 17 - At 3:30 a.m. anti-Castro troops invaded Cuba (our telegram No. 133 of April 17). The principal landings were in the swampy Zapata Peninsula in the Cochinos Bay area on the south coast of the central Province of Las Villas. Other landings were rumoured to have occurred in the Provinces of Oriente and Matanzas and on the Isle of Pines, but the Government emphatically denied these rumours. A state of national emergency and full mobilisation was proclaimed. Singing,

slogan-shouting Militia troops mustered, were packed into trucks and joined convoys of guns, ammunition and supplies moving eastward out of Havana in a steady stream. Sand-bagged gun emplacements and street barricades were thrown up throughout the city and Militia guards were heavily reinforced. All telephone, telegraph, air and sea communications were severed. (The Ambassador's telephone call to the Under-Secretary was probably a freak of inefficiency.) British and Canadian citizens in Cuba were advised to keep off the streets and remain in the shelter of their residences whenever possible. The Embassy staff spent most of the day confirming the well-being of Canadians and completing emergency evacuation planning.

April 18 - More than 10,000 suspected counter-revolutionaries or sympathizers were arrested (our telegram No. 138 of April 19). The Chief of Protocol of the Ministry of External Relations informed the United Kingdom Ambassador that this had been done to neutralize an anti-Castro "Fifth Column" in Cuba. Extraordinary security precautions involved frisking all persons entering buildings, physical search of some persons including some diplomatic personnel, blocking entry to some Embassies, cordoning off certain streets and buildings, and unannounced entry into private premises. The Counsellor of the Embassy has described in the attached memorandum how his hotel room was invaded.

April 19 - One result of these drastic security measures was that for the first time in weeks Havana enjoyed a relatively quiet night free from explosions, fires and shooting. Movement of troops and weapons had virtually ceased and the city waited for news from the battlefield. Fear was the predominating factor; there was little news from the fighting front; house-to-house searches continued; thousands of suspects were herded into improvised detention centres. Many people went into hiding and others exhibited nervousness as they walked the streets under the muzzles of machineguns. The Embassy staff completed enquiries concerning the welfare of Canadian citizens in the Havana area, but were not able to communicate with Canadians outside Havana.

April 20 - The Ambassador was awakened by the rattle of machinegun fire, but he discovered that it came from Militia soldiers celebrating the victory that the Cuban Government had announced that morning (our telegram No. 141 of April 20). There was little jubilation in Havana, and no public victory celebrations. Tension in the city increased rather than diminished as a new wave of searches and arrests was instituted and it became apparent that those detained would not be released immediately (our telegram No. 146 of April 21). The Embassy staff made further efforts to locate Canadian citizens and to assist those who were in difficulties.

April 21 - Embassy telegraphic communications were restored. Two more Canadian priests had been arrested and representations were made when the Ambassador called on the Chief of Protocol on their behalf and on behalf of the priests and nuns who were confined to their places of residence. Notes were delivered to the Ministry of External Relations asking for permission to visit the detained priests and the Canadian college at Colon. Permission was also requested for a Canadian cargo plane, which was in Havana under charter by Cubana Airlines, to carry passengers to Canada (our telegram No. 147 of April 22).

April 22-23 - The Embassy staff worked most of the weekend cyphering telegrams; assisting Canadians to obtain transportation out of Cuba; endeavouring to obtain information concerning detained Canadians; and liaising with the United Kingdom Embassy concerning emergency planning. Conditions at the detention centres visited by our officers were chaotic, and the Commandante of one centre confessed that he did not even have a list of his prisoners. He explained that those who had confessed had just been taken away and a new group had been brought in, so that he could not be sure who he had in custody. Nevertheless, our impression was that the over-worked security police staff were doing their best to ameliorate hardships.

April 24 - The Counsellor of the Embassy called on the Chief of Protocol to make renewed representations for the release of the four detained Canadian priests and the confinement of other priests and nuns. The Ministry of External Relations appeared to be functioning with a skeleton staff and it has been impossible to obtain satisfaction on any question raised with the Ministry since the beginning of the current crisis (our telegram No. 150 of April 24).



The Embassy.